

Ontario universities facing supply-demand imbalance

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REPORTER

Six months after the Ontario government announced a new funding model for the province's universities, questions are being raised about whether the framework is flexible enough to respond to the challenges facing both Ontario's more remote regions as well as its booming Greater Toronto Area.

Currently, universities and colleges receive funds tied to their enrolment. Under the new plan, institutions will have to keep enrolment within several percentage points of a target that is now being negotiated between each school and the provincial government. Funding will not be available for enrolment growth beyond that target.

On the other hand, institutions grappling with shrinking enrolment will not lose all of their per-student funding.

"We want to provide some predictability and safety," Deb Matthews, Deputy Premier and Minister of Advanced Education and Skills Development (MAESD), said at the time.

But as negotiations between the ministry and the sector have continued since January, concerns have also grown that centrally located and GTA universities may have to scale back admissions.

The GTA is expected to see another three million people in the next 25 years, according to Ministry of Finance projections. Other Ontario cities will also continue to grow.

If demand for postsecondary education mirrors the growth in population, a set enrolment target will lead to more students in the GTA not getting into schools close to home.

In April, Amit Chakma, president of the University of Western Ontario, told an Economic Club of Canada lunch that the new framework will limit postsecondary access.

"Forty-five per cent of our undergraduate student body comes from the GTA," said Janice Deakin, the provost of Western, who has been closely involved in the discussions with the province. "We have upward pressures on our enrolment, we are not faced with the prospect of declining enrolment."

In northern parts of the province, the situation is quite different. Last year, Algoma, Nipissing and Laurentian saw first-year enrolment by high school graduates drop by double digits. The province's goal is to help these institutions weather such challenges. The province's hope is that specialized program offerings and better access to financial aid for lower-income families would drive some students to these institutions, a source familiar with the talks said.

"We are committed to ensuring that there is a place at a college or university for every willing and qualified Ontario student," a government spokesperson said.

Some observers cautioned that accessibility declines if students have to move for postsecondary education.

"We have a lot of students who live at home, we have a lot of students who cannot easily travel because the cost of living in residence is higher than living at home. We know that the majority of our students work, they have jobs for 20 hours a week or more," said Rhonda Lenton, the provost of York University, who has also been involved in the talks. "It's not so easy to say to those students, 'Well, the system wants you to go elsewhere,'" she said.

Dr. Lenton, who will become president of York this summer, suggested that remote universities can draw up strategies to recruit students from farther away. "Those universities need to look at incentivizing students. I don't think it's for the GTA universities to kind of close their doors," she said.

That is the approach some northern universities are taking. Laurentian University, for example, has opened new graduate programs in nursing and Indigenous studies among others. And the school is looking for increased provincial funding for its graduate school of architecture.

“We are happy to compete for the best students and faculty based on who we are,” said Dominic Giroux, the president of Laurentian. “We are not looking for handouts, we are looking to strengthen our programs.”

But even Mr. Giroux allows that the region may have too many schools for today’s needs. Nipissing University (which used to be a college affiliated with Laurentian) is within a two-hour drive. Two colleges – Cambrian and Boreal – are even closer. All three face tough budget issues, auditors have said.

“If we had to reinvent the university system today, the configuration might be different,” Mr. Giroux said.

Southern universities say they recognize their colleagues in the north need time to adjust to demographic realities.

“As the chips start to fall here, there will be some clarity over the next five to 10 years ...” said Western’s Dr. Deakin. “The political reality is that it would be difficult for any community to imagine not having an institution that resides [there] now.”

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